Urban space, political identity and the unwanted legacies of state socialism: Bucharest's problematic *Centru Civic* in the post-socialist era

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Abstract

This paper explores the relationship between the urban cultural landscape of Bucharest and the making of post-socialist Romanian national identity. As the capital of socialist Romania, central Bucharest was extensively remodelled by Nicolae Ceauşescu into the *Centru Civic* in order to materialise Romania's socialist identity. After the Romanian 'Revolution' of 1989, the national and local state had to deal with a significant 'left-over' socialist urban landscape which was highly discordant with the orientation of post-socialist Romania and its search for a new identity. Ceauşescu's vast socialist showpiece left a difficult legacy which challenges the material and representational reshaping of Bucharest and constructions of post-socialist Romanian national identity more broadly. The paper analyses four attempts to deal with the *Centru Civic*: developments in the immediate post-1989 period; the international architectural competition *Bucureşti 2000*; proposals for building a *Cathedral of National Salvation*; and the *Esplanada* project. Despite over 20 years of proposals central Bucharest remains largely unchanged. The paper thus deals with a failed attempt to re-shape the built environment in support of national goals.

Introduction

In this paper we explore the complex and contested relationship between urban landscape and the (re)making of national identity in post-socialist Romania focusing on the capital, Bucharest. Studies have drawn attention to the way that efforts to shape and sustain national identity often influence the nature of urban development and design and how in turn capital cities are projected outwards to "act as national symbols for global audiences" (Smith and Ebejer 137). In this paper we explore the role of urban landscapes in expressing national identity in a post-socialist context but we also develop an original perspective by considering the way that a particular "left over" landscape of state-socialism (Czepczyński; Light and Young, "Reconfiguring") persists and disrupts efforts to use the built environment to underpin new constructions of national identity. It does this in a context which has received relatively little attention with regard to these matters (Romania and south-east Europe more generally).

To do this we analyse the difficulties experienced by the Romanian state in attempts to reshape the built environment of central Bucharest inherited from the state-socialist period. During the socialist period Nicolae Ceaușescu (Romania's socialist leader) extensively remodelled the capital to create a *Centru Civic* (Civic Center) that was a unique materialisation and demonstration of Romania's socialist values and identity. After the Romanian 'Revolution' of 1989, the national and local state had to deal with an urban landscape containing many elements which are discordant with the new identity which post-socialist Romania sought to project to an international audience. In particular, Ceaușescu's vast socialist showpiece quickly became a problematic legacy that compromised the material and representational reshaping of Bucharest as modern, capitalist and European. The urban landscapes of state-socialism cannot always be easily erased and can become the subject of

contested processes of design and representation which link to larger processes of nation-building.

More than twenty years after the fall of Ceauşescu's regime much of the socialist showpiece of the *Centru Civic* is largely unchanged. We explore the contested politics and design visions for reshaping the city centre in the post-1989 period in order to illustrate the complex relationship between the built environment and the re-shaping of national identity during post-socialism. The paper begins by exploring the link between the urban landscape of capital cities and national identity in the context of post-socialist transformations before focussing on Bucharest's *Centru Civic*. After reviewing Ceauşescu's dramatic reshaping of central Bucharest in the 1980s the paper analyses efforts since 1989 to remodel this landscape. There have been four principal approaches to this remodelling: the piecemeal approach of the early post-socialist period; the staging of an international architectural competition in the mid 1990s (*Bucureşti 2000*) which was intended to comprehensively remake the *Centru Civic*; proposals for 'healing' the *Centru Civic* through building a *Cathedral of National Salvation*; and the project in the mid 2000s for an international architectural showpiece (*Esplanada*).

Capital cities, urban landscapes and post-socialist identity

The built landscapes of capital cities are held to be important in the construction of political identities, especially during times of crisis and/or rapid political change (Cochrane; Kaika; Smith, "The role;" Cochrane and Passmore; Cochrane; Delanty and Jones; McNeill and Tewdwr-Jones). Van der Wusten (130-31) argues that capital cities are "places showing to the domestic public and the outside world what the state is, what the national identity is, and how the polity imagines the rest of the world in light of its own position." Blockmans points to

repeated attempts over history by new European regimes to transform urban morphology to express their ideologies. As he suggests: "Particular types of buildings with their specific functions had to be constructed, transformed, or demolished. The meaningful urban architecture needed to be imposing, visible, omnipresent, and easy to understand. Associations with older models helped to provide legitimacy to new regimes" (19). In a similar way, architecture has often been the site of nation-building projects (Delanty and Jones; Smith, "The role") and, as Gospodini suggests, "innovative design of [urban] space can work efficiently as a place identity generator" (242).

Despite the importance of the urban landscapes of capital cities in expressing national identities and political order, cities are rarely complete expressions of the dominant political ideology and identity. For this to be achieved the city would need to be made entirely anew to fully express in built form the aspirations and agenda of the ruling order. There have been some attempts to achieve this (eg. Hitler's Berlin, Mussolini's Rome, Stalin's Moscow – see Cavalcanti, "Urban reconstruction"). However, in most cases capital cities will contain substantial traces of the architecture of previous political regimes. As Smith ("The role") argues "most capital cities will contain a mix of styles that continue to demonstrate the values of previous rulers. Contemporary regimes assert their own version of statehood by removing, re-semanticizing and adapting existing buildings, as well as imposing styles, statements and statues to make their own ideologies visible." (64). Like national identity itself, efforts to fix that identity in the built environment are a fluid, ongoing and contested process. Much of the previous literature on the relationship between city form and national identity has focused on the process of making anew, but there has been much less attention paid to the troublesome role of 'left over' landscape elements from previous regimes.

This issue has particular relevance in the formerly socialist states of Central and Eastern Europe which for two decades have been engaged in an intense process of redefining national

identities, both for their own citizens but also for the eyes of the wider world. Post-socialist states are eager to project new identities as young, modern, European and capitalist states with an emphatically international outlook. Central to this project has been a rejection of the state-socialist period (see Verdery) and a nostalgic evocation of the pre-socialist era which is often (re)imagined in terms of a 'Golden Age.' Post-socialist identity-building frequently seeks to emphasise (or invent) historical, economic and cultural ties with Western Europe (Light, "Romania;" Morgan and Pritchard; Young and Kaczmarek).

In order to project this new political identity to the wider world formerly socialist states employ diverse and sometimes contradictory strategies. They may seek to join international organizations (such as the United Nations or the European Union) as means of declaring their adherence to particular values. Alternatively, they may seek to host international meetings, congresses or sporting events as a way of presenting their new face to the international community. Similarly, nation-states may embark on projects to create a country 'brand' (Anholt; Kaneva and Popescu). Such branding may be intended to project a country image that will be attractive to foreign direct investment (Young) or foreign tourists (Hall, "Destination," "Branding;" Morgan and Pritchard). For example, Romania has attempted a number of branding campaigns (Dolea and Ţăruş) that are intended to present the country as modern, democratic, capitalist, and part of the European mainstream.

Capital cities also engage in marketing and branding exercises that are intended both to erase the memories of the socialist past and project a new identity as modern, dynamic post-socialist cities that are good places to do business (Young and Kaczmarkek). Again, this frequently involves the evocation of an imagined pre-socialist 'Golden Age'. For example, Dumbraveanu notes that attempts to create a post-socialist brand for Bucharest have been founded on the myth of the 'Little Paris' in a way that recalls the inter-war period when elite Romanian society was characterised by a love of all things French, and when numerous

buildings were erected by French architects or in a French style. Yet, such branding exercises can only be partly successful in their attempts to erase the memory of the socialist period (Young and Kaczmarek). For example, for all the efforts to rebrand Bucharest the city continues to be associated in the Western imagination with Nicolae Ceauşescu and his monumental 'House of the People' (see below).

As part of these strategies post-socialist regimes have invested considerable efforts in remaking the landscape of their capital cities so that they more directly express post-socialist values and aspirations. In some cases this can involve the deliberate destruction of the landscapes created by state socialism. The demolition of the socialist-era *Palace of the Republic* in Berlin and its replacement with a facsimile of the pre-existing Royal Palace (Colomb; Staiger) is one such example. In other cases, post-socialist regimes seek to directly reach back to the pre-socialist past to create landscapes that reflect their aspirations. The rebuilding of the nineteenth century Cathedral of Christ the Saviour in Moscow (Gentes; Sidorov) is one such example. A further strategy is to build entirely new landscapes that express post-socialist values and project a sense of purpose and confidence. For example, prestige public building projects (such as parliament buildings, cultural flagships, conference centres and expo sites) can be used to express new identities (Gospodini; McNeill and Tewdwr-Jones). Berlin is often regarded as an exemplar of this approach (eg. Cochrane; Colomb; Ladd; Molnar; Schlör; Staiger; Till; Weszkalnys). Much of the post-socialist development of Berlin has been founded on a normative model of a stereotypical 'European city' and the inspiration for remaking Berlin was derived from the city's pre-socialist past and was thus an attempt at the "'normalization' of a European city centre in architectural terms" (Colomb 298). There has been continuous debate in Germany about the role of the capital in a newly (re)unified Germany (Cochrane) with the results being clearly expressed in its urban landscape. In particular the government area has been rebuilt in ways intended to display the

power of the re-unified German state and to underpin notions of German nationhood as associated with a modern, liberal, Western country.

However, while Berlin may have been able to pursue material and symbolic reconstruction with rigour and substantial coordinated resources this is not a situation that is replicated in every post-socialist capital. Indeed, in many other post-socialist cities many elements of the built environment of state-socialism (such as symbolic public buildings and vast socialist housing and industrial areas) persist and continuity of the landscapes of state-socialism is perhaps more typical than radical change. Erasing or remaking the material landscapes of state socialism is no easy feat and in many cases there are practical barriers, such as cost, the need for space and more pressing priorities, which prevent the destruction of such landscapes. Furthermore, not all members of post-socialist societies are in favour of a simplistic 'de-Communisation' of the cultural landscape, and elite and public visions of the landscapes of cities can vary considerably, making the design and management of the urban landscape politically and culturally contested. The question of what to do with the legacies of the cultural landscapes of state-socialism is further complicated by the political nature of what should replace them in the attempts to deny the past and present a new vision of the nation through the capital city.

The cultural landscapes of post-socialist cities are, thus, complex entities which at times defy re-shaping to meet the new needs of the nation-state. Socialist era landscapes persist and impede or disrupt attempts to use the built environment to support the transmission of new images of the nation. This is apparent even in Berlin. Ladd and Till trace how the city is haunted by the 'ghosts' of its history as expressed in the urban landscape, which form reminders of a history that is not part of the capitalist mainstream. Cochrane notes the continuity of buildings built by the Nazi and Communist regimes which have undergone internal and external renovation but are still used as government offices. As Schlör suggests,

the Berlin Wall has all but completely been removed but traces remain, often circulating as heritage tourism, and its memory has been made into an 'urban icon.' Weszkalnys traces the post-1989 history of Berlin's Alexanderplatz, noting how debates around this former socialist showpiece problematised any smooth transition of the built environment into a symbol of the new Germany. Intended to be reconstituted as a symbol of Berlin's and Germany's re-unification "It was imagined that a built environment could be created that would appeal to East and West Berliners alike and express something of their reconstituted self" (213), but it was several years before it was effectively regenerated. In Warsaw, the Stalin-era *Palace of Science and Culture* provides another striking example of the persistence of a key socialist exemplar and the debates it provoked over its fate in the post-socialist era (Dawson; Zaborowska).

Colomb ("Requiem", "Staging") suggests that the nature of the reshaping of the landscapes of former state-socialist cities is influenced by several overlapping discourses around architecture and urban design, politics, history, memory and identity in the context of the changing political economy of the post-socialist city. She thus suggests that the re-shaping of such 'burdened landscapes' is highly complex, contested and by no means complete, points which are also stressed by studies of various 'left-over' socialist landscapes and their post-socialist fates (Czepczyński, "Cultural", "Interpreting;" Light and Young, "Political," "Reconfiguring"). In such cases the past persists and re-emerges to disrupt and haunt efforts to establish new, post-socialist identities.

For all the importance attached to urban landscape in constructing post-socialist political identities, there has been only limited research on what happens to the urban landscapes of state-socialism during attempts to create capital cities that express post-socialist identities. In particular, the literature to date has done relatively little to analyse how post-socialist cities have coped with the inherited landscapes of state-socialist cities, particularly those dominated

by former socialist showpieces. That work which has been undertaken has mainly considered cities that have established either a relatively thorough level of change or exhibit spectacular examples of the destruction and reconstruction of particular buildings. Thus in this paper we go on to consider an example of a surviving socialist-era showpiece development which now poses considerable challenges to the project of creating an urban landscape that reflects and projects a post-socialist national identity.

Building Bucharest's *Centru Civic*, 1977-89

The rule of Nicolae Ceauşescu (leader of the Romanian Communist Party after 1965) was characterised by often extreme attempts to remake the nature of Romanian society. As a part of this larger political project between 1968-89 many towns and cities (particularly county capitals) in Romania underwent a process of 'systematization' (Drazin; Ioan, "The Peculiar"). Systematisation involved modernising and improving city centres in order to create modern and functional spaces. The process frequently started with the destruction of the organic city centre and historic architecture that the socialist regime had inherited from previous eras. In their place arose a new urban landscape, at the heart of which was the *Centru Civic* (Civic Centre). New city centres were characterised by rectilinear axes and monumental buildings and invariably housed the key centres of administrative and political power (of which the headquarters of the local Communist Party was the most important). The *Centru Civic* also included large open spaces where the city's residents could gather to be addressed by their leaders. Systematization produced standardised and uniform cityscapes that were material expressions of new forms of sociality, modernity and progress.

Initially, Bucharest was spared wholesale systematization, although individual squares and plazas were remodelled. However, this situation changed following a major earthquake in

March 1977 which caused considerable damage to the capital. Ceauşescu had been impressed during a visit to North Korea by the monumental cityscapes of Pyongyang and the highly regimented spectacles dedicated to the cult of personality (Deletant). He was interested in remodelling Bucharest along similar lines and the earthquake presented him with an opportunity to embark on a grandiose scheme to create a new, socialist capital and shortly after the earthquake the construction of a new *Centru Civic* in Bucharest was announced (Cavalcanti, "Ceausescu's"). This major city centre development was a reversal of the previous policy of expanding the city through constructing new suburban housing districts (Turnock).

Bucharest's new *Centru Civic* was the most ambitious urban development project attempted in Romania. Ceauşescu intended the project to be a demonstration of the regime's achievements as well as a demonstrative statement of Romania's socialist identity. He is reported to have stated: "I am looking for a symbolic representation of the two decades of enlightenment we have just lived through; I need something grand, something very grand, which reflects what we have already achieved" (qtd. in Cavalcanti, "Totalitarian" 278). The *Centru Civic* was shockingly radical in its impact on the capital. The project involved the demolition of about five square kilometres of the city centre, equivalent to the area of Venice (Ioan, "Urban"). The area most affected was the historic core of the city (see Figure 1), an area of low-density eighteenth- and nineteenth-century buildings containing many medieval churches and other monuments (Giurescu). The effect was traumatic for the people who lived in this area. Around 40,000 people were forcibly removed from their residences (often at very short notice) and rehoused in hastily-built apartment blocks on the periphery of the city (Cavalcanti, "Totalitarian"). With them disappeared the communities and the memories of city life they had sustained. The principal feature of the new *Centru Civic* was an enormous monumental building – named *Casa Republicii* (the House of the Republic) but almost

universally known as *Casa Poporului* (the House of the People) (see Figure 2). This covers an area of 6.3ha with a frontal elevation 276m wide and 86m high. It comprises 23 stories, numerous grand ceremonial rooms on the entrance level and space for 700 offices (Cavalcanti, "Ceausescu's;" Vachon). The building is utterly out of proportion with anything else in the city, something that is attributed to Ceauşescu's complete inability to understand plans and scale models and his subsequent demands for something bigger (Cavalcanti, "Urban"). In terms of function *Casa Poporului* was intended to house all the institutions and ministries of state power in a single complex. However, the primary purpose of the building seems to have been as a material and symbolic proclamation of Ceauşescu's cult of personality (Oţoiu).

  Casa Poporului stands at one end of a grand ceremonial boulevard (then called the Bulevardul Victoriei Socialismului - 'the Boulevard of the Victory of Socialism'). This runs on a west-east alignment and leads nowhere in particular. Its principal function was to provide a ceremonial avenue along which to approach *Casa Poporului* (see Figure 3). The boulevard is 3.5km in length and 120m wide and one oft-repeated story states that Ceauşescu deliberately intended it to be longer and wider than the Champ-Élysées in Paris. Between *Casa Poporului* and a major intersection (*Piaţa Unirii*) the boulevard is lined with ten-story apartment buildings that were intended to house key state functionaries and officials. Between *Piata Unirii* and eastern end of the boulevard was space for further monumental buildings (including a national library and a grand concert arena), while the eastern part of the boulevard is dominated again by apartment blocks. Behind *Casa Poporului* were various other monumental buildings intended for various uses.

  The destruction in central Bucharest caused by the building of the *Centru Civic* was without precedent in Romania. In financial terms, *Casa Poporului* is estimated to have cost $3.3 billion (Ionescu) while the broader *Centru Civic* cost in the region of $1.5 billion

(O'Neill). Yet these costs were incurred at a time when Romanians were experiencing unprecedented austerity and hardship as a result of Ceauşescu's policy of exporting food and rationing energy. Consequently, Bucharesters (particularly those whose homes had been destroyed) regarded the *Centru Civic* with contempt: the project represents one of darkest and most harrowing periods in Romania's recent history.

There has been a tendency to dismiss Bucharest's *Centru Civic* as the work of a mad dictator, a project without reason or purpose. Yet such an approach overlooks that fact that the *Centru Civic* project was underpinned by a belief in the transformative power of the built environment and that new spaces could redefine senses of identity and reinforce practices of governance (O'Neill). Neither was the project solely the product of Ceauşescu alone (as is frequently assumed). Instead, as Maria Popa convincingly argues, some of Bucharest's architects and city-planners were supportive of the project. There had long been an interest in 'improving' Bucharest through the construction of a Civic Centre, an idea dating back to the 1935 Master Plan for the city. Thus part of the planning profession regarded Ceauşescu's proposals as a socialist fulfilment of pre-World War II plans for Bucharest. It was an opportunity to finally modernise the capital.

Ultimately the *Centru Civic* was never completed. Ceauşescu's regime collapsed in the violent 'Revolution' of December 1989 leaving the project half finished. Of the 485ha of the *Centru Civic,* 200ha were open space, where former buildings had been cleared but new structures had not yet been erected (Primărie Municipiul Bucureşti). The main boulevard was largely complete as was *Piata Unirii* and the apartment blocks at its western end. *Casa Poporului* was about 70% complete although only the ground floor rooms were finished while the rest of the building remained a building site. Surrounding this edifice were various incomplete monumental buildings. Similarly, on the eastern part of the main boulevard the proposed national library was still incomplete while the neighbouring concert arena had not

progressed beyond foundations (see Figure 4). The fringes of the main boulevard were littered with unfinished apartment blocks. Romania's post-Ceauşescu regime inherited a scarred city and the question of what to do with the landscape bequeathed by the dictator has been one of Bucharest's biggest problems in the post-socialist period.

The *Centru Civic* in the early post-socialist period

The fall of Eastern European communist systems in the popular revolutions of 1989-90 are often associated in popular and media imaginings with the destruction of the urban landscapes of state socialism, with rapid political change accompanied by rapid change in the cityscape. However, the Romanian case demonstrates a very different trajectory, and the treatment of the *Centru Civic* in the initial years of the post-socialist period was not nearly so dramatic, something which can be explained at least partly by the nature of the Romanian 'Revolution'. In December 1989 a group calling itself the National Salvation Front (NSF) took power in the name of the people. Recognising the widespread public mood for an end to socialism the NSF committed itself to political and economic reform. However, it soon became apparent that the Front was dominated by second-tier members of the Romanian Communist Party who were intent on overthrowing Ceauşescu but whose commitment to dismantling state socialism was questionable. The NSF won elections in May 1990 and again in 1992 and its candidate Ion Iliescu (a former leading member of the Communist Party *nomenklatura*) was elected president.

During the early 1990s the primary concern of the NSF was to consolidate its hold on power whilst attempting to reform the hypercentralised economy inherited from Ceauşescu. In this context, resolving the question of the unfinished *Centru Civic* was low on the new administration's list of priorities. There was no political or public support for continuing the

building work to Ceauşescu's original model. On the contrary, the *Centru Civic* – and particularly its central structure, *Casa Poporului* - was now an anachronistic legacy of totalitarianism that was starkly discordant with Romania's professed post-socialist identity and aspirations (Light, "Facing"). Particular debate centred on the future of *Casa Poporului*. Some argued that it represented the most traumatic period of Romania's recent history and should therefore be demolished. Others argued that it should be turned into a casino, a museum of communism, the country's new stock exchange or even a hotel (Danta; Ionescu; Salecl). Ultimately the sheer size of the unfinished *Centru Civic* and the extent of the intervention that would have been necessary to transform this landscape seems to have been enough to deter Romania's new political leadership from taking any action. The easiest course of action (particularly when confronted with numerous more pressing problems in reforming the hypercentralised economy inherited from the Ceausescu era) was to do nothing.

In consequence, the construction sites of the *Centru Civic* were simply abandoned. For a time in early 1990 *Casa Poporului* was thrown open to a curious Bucharest public (Mangiurea) although since most of the site was still under construction there appears to have been little to see. Elsewhere, anything valuable was stolen from building sites which were then left to the elements (Amariei). Hundreds of overhead cranes were left to rust where building work had stopped in December 1989. In this hiatus, architects attempted to produce solutions to deal with the 'left-over landscapes' of the *Centru Civic* and from the outset a number of proposals emerged from professionals working outside Romania. For example, in 1990 both Italian and French architects advanced proposals for addressing the *Centru Civic* (Beldiman, "Editorial;" Tureanu *et al*). The following year a national competition was organised in Romania for proposals to redevelop the area around *Casa Poporului*. This produced a range of utopian and idealistic designs (Ioan, "Power", "Bucharest") but there was no broader political interest in taking them forward.

In 1991 Romania's politicians arrived at a solution to the problem posed by *Casa Poporului* by deciding to complete the construction work and move both chambers of the post-socialist parliament into the building. Given their background in the former Communist Party, many of Romania's new political elite may have been much less hostile to the building than the wider Bucharest public. Government decision 372 of 1993 transferred the building to the administration of the Chamber of Deputies which started holding sessions in the building in 1996. *Casa Poporului* was renamed *Palatul Parlamentului* ('The Parliament Palace'). This was a deliberate attempt to reconfigure its symbolic meaning and affirm its new role as the centre of parliamentary democracy in Romania, thereby legitimating Romania's status as a post-socialist, democratic state. As Smith ("The role" 80) argues, the national project requires key institutions to be located in the capital "and to conspicuously occupy the palaces of formr powers."

Elsewhere in the *Centru Civic*, the apartment blocks along *Bulevardul Unirii* became highly sought after in the early 1990s. These were modern, well-built and earthquake proof structures and consequently became the residences of choice among Romania's new political and business class. The area around *Piata Unirii* was to become the most expensive real estate in the country. In addition, the arrival of global capitalism in Romania was clearly proclaimed in the *Piaţa Unirii* area. In the early 1990s many of the socialist-era buildings in this area were adorned with large (and often illuminated) billboards and advertisements for global brands, consumer goods, and food and drink products, frequently featuring English words. *Piaţa Unirii* unofficially became the new center of Bucharest where the energetic and exciting cityscape formed a vivid contrast with the drabness of much of the rest of Bucharest. It can have been no coincidence that Romania's first branch of MacDonald's opened in this area in summer 1995.

Thus, during the early 1990s it was the private sector that had the biggest impact in transforming some parts of the landscape of the *Centru Civic*. Conversely there was little interest in the issue from either the Bucharest *Primărie* (City Hall) or the relevant government ministry (Beldiman, "Editorial"). Between 1990-96 Romania was ruled by an elite dominated by former communists for whom de-communising the urban landscape was not a priority, and in any case the scale of the task meant that there was no obvious or straightforward solution. Moreover, far from seeking to remake the socialist-era landscape, the government continued building work on a part of it (*Casa Poporului*) despite the fact that for most Romanians this building represented the most traumatic era of their recent past.

Bucureşti 2000: opening Romania to the wider world

From the mid-1990s more interest was shown in the issue of what to do with this 'left-over landscape' of socialism. From 1993 the idea of an international competition to generate proposals to address the *Centru Civic* gathered momentum but in a time of recession, austerity and stalled economic reform there were no funds to organise such an event. In 1995 the president of the Romanian Union of Architects arranged a meeting with Ion Iliescu, the state president. Iliescu gave his support to the proposal for an international competition with the result that things moved quickly (Beldiman, "Editorial"). Government decision 684 of 29 August 1995 called for an International Planning Competition entitled *Bucureşti 2000* which would unfold over the following year and the project was launched on 1 October 1995.

The sudden change of heart by the government regarding the *Centru Civic* may not have been coincidental. By this point Romania's international image had been seriously tarnished by stalled and ineffective economic reform, widespread corruption among the political and business elite, the presence of numerous members of the former Communist Party

nomenklatura in government, and the emergence of an unpleasant strand of xenophobic nationalism (which enjoyed the support of the leading elite) directed at Romania's Hungarian minority (Gallagher, "Romania;" "Romania's"). Both parliamentary and presidential elections were scheduled for late 1996 and the Social Democratic Party of Romania (the successor to the National Salvation Front) could not take re-election for granted. By sponsoring an international planning and architectural competition the government and president could attempt to present a positive image of Romania to the wider world and begin to repair the country's battered international standing. Whether the neo-communist political elite were genuinely concerned about the problem of Ceauşescu's urban legacy is unclear, particularly since Adrian Năstase, the president of the Chamber of Deputies and leading figure in the communist-era *nomenclatura*, is reported to have threatened to veto any proposal emerging from *Bucureşti 2000* that adversely affected *Palatul Parlamentului* (Ioan, "Power," "The Peculiar," "Modern").

The *Bucureşti 2000* competition had multiple objectives, some more explicit than others. Its primary role was to generate solutions for the unfinished *Centru Civic*. As Beldiman ("Untitled") argues, the competition was intended to remind politicians, local administrators and Romanian society more generally that Bucharest was a wounded city (cf. Schneider and Susser) that needed 'healing' (*vindeca*). This healing was both ideological and architectural (Barriss). *Bucureşti 2000* was intended to cleanse and reconfigure a totalitarian landscape as well as producing a new architecture that completed the project in a way appropriate to Romania's post-socialist identity and aspirations. The competition also represented an opportunity to look outside Romania for a solution to the problem of the *Centru Civic* (particularly since Romanians had made little progress in addressing the issue themselves). Moreover, as an international competition *Bucureşti 2000* was intended to demonstrate Romania's openness to the wider world. The competition was an opportunity both to direct

the attention of the international architectural community to Romania and to showcase Bucharest as a (potential) city of the future. The competition also aimed to bring Romanian architects into the global orbit and expose them to contemporary international thinking on planning, architecture and urban design (after more than two decades of isolation under Ceauşescu). For this reason Barriss treats *Bucureşti 2000* as much as a competition for ideas as for a buildable, achievable project. However, in the search outside Romania for a solution to the *Centru Civic* the residents of Bucharest do not appear to have been consulted about their city's future. In this sense, *Bucureşti 2000* was a continuation of the top-down form of urban planning that had been pursued by Ceauşescu.

Bucureşti 2000 was clearly successful in generating international interest among the global architectural profession and went some way towards a 'Europeanisation' of the process of transforming the built environment. By 1 April 1996 235 architectural teams from 35 countries had submitted proposals (44 of which were submitted by Romanian teams) (Tureanu *et al*). The 14-member jury (composed of both Romanian and international architects) selected 15 projects (only one of which was from Romania) for the second round of the competition. In September 1996 the winning project (with a prize of $100,000) was announced, produced by a German team headed by Meinhard von Gerkan.

The winning design was an ambitious proposal to retain the basic elements of the *Centru Civic* but to link Ceauşescu's 'new' city with the historic core, balancing the historic and the modern. It proposed a dense network of new buildings on vacant land where construction work was unfinished. The proposal included the development of a new business district around *Palatul Parlamentului* and proposed the construction of a number of skyscrapers around the palace itself. These would not obscure or hide the palace completely but would neutralise its visual impact since it would no longer be the tallest building in this part of the city and would no longer dominate the city's skyline. In addition, the project also proposed to

break the principal axis of Ceauşescu's centre by creating a lake in the central part of the principal boulevard (to be fed by the River Dâmboviţa which flows underground at this point). For the jury of the competition this was a 'high value' plan that could bring about the desired healing of Bucharest (Beldiman).

Von Gerkan's project certainly offered many advantages for Bucharest (and Romania more broadly). Perhaps most importantly, it sent out the right messages about Romania's post-socialist identity and aspirations. The creation of a new financial centre around *Palatul Parlamentului* would not only create abundant new business space in Bucharest but would also demonstrate Romania's commitment to a market economy. The adoption of skyscraper towers also affirmed Romania's allegiance to the language of international capitalist architecture. The project would also have successfully reconfigured and eroded the symbolic impact of Ceauşescu's palace, something that had been the defining symbol of totalitarianism. Moreover, the winning project was designed so that it could be implemented in stages without compromising the overall ensemble (Tureanu *et al*; Barriss). But while the winning project may have met the needs of the Romanian government some Romanian architects were disappointed with it. One described it as "utopian" and "counter-economic" (Ioan, "The History" no pag.) and was critical of its failure to address the shortage of public space in Bucharest (Ioan, "Urban"). Moreover, as a competition without a viable business plan attached to it, it was criticised as ultimately little more than a paper exercise (Ioan, "Power").

In the elections of November 1996 the Social Democratic Party of Romania was voted out of power and replaced by a new centre-right government committed to rapid neoliberal reform. In particular its focus was on accelerating the stalled economic reforms of its predecessor and restructuring or closing the numerous loss-making state-owned enterprises. In this context, the remaking of the *Centru Civic* was not high on the new government's priorities. Similarly the Bucharest *Primărie* (City Hall) does not appear to have been in any

hurry to move forward with *Bucureşti 2000* (Ioan, "Power"). It took almost two years after the end of the competition until the government took action. Ordinance 129 of 29 August 1998 declared the area that included Bucharest's historic centre and the *Centru Civic* as a 'zone of national interest'. It also established an urban development agency to implement the winning project of the *Bucureşti 2000* competition. This agency was to be a commercial society, indicating that the government was unwilling – or, more likely, unable - to fund the scheme and that its implementation was to be left to the private sector. However, this was another unrealistic assumption. The implementation of the von Gerkan plan would have cost an estimated $18 billion at 1999 prices ("Bucharest 2000"; Ioan, "Urban"). For comparison, total foreign investment in the 1990-96 period was $1.2 billion (Smith, "Transition").

It was not until 2000 that the Bucharest 2000 Development Agency was established (by British investors) and the funding secured (Ioan, "The History"). However, in the elections of November 2000 the centre-right government was replaced by a new administration headed again by the Social Democratic Party of Romania. This was a government in which many of the former communist *nomenclatura* again played a key role. Thus, Ion Iliescu was re-elected as President and Adrian Năstase took over the role of Prime Minister. The new government clearly did not like the winning entry for the *Bucureşti 2000* competition. Within two days of taking office Emergency Ordinance 295 suspended the 1998 legislation that set up the urban development agency for the *Centru Civic*. The reasons for this decision are unclear (Ioan, "Modern"). There is a well-developed practice in Romania of newly elected governments swiftly cancelling projects endorsed by their predecessors. In this case the newly elected Social Democratic government may have been unwilling to complete a project for which the previous government could take the credit (Stan and Turcescu, "Politics"). It may also have been the case that many in the new government (particularly those with roots in the former communist regime) did not appreciate the proposals to neutralise the symbolic impact of

Palatul Parlamentului. In any case, nothing further was heard of the *Bucureşti 2000* project and the 1998 legislation that enabled it was formally revoked on 25 November 2004 (three days before the next round of parliamentary elections).

Thus, more than ten years after the overthrow of Ceauşescu, the Romanian state had barely made any progress in remaking the unwanted landscape of the *Centru Civic*. Although the winning entry of *Bucureşti 2000* had proposed a solution for this part of the city there was not the political support to implement the project. However, in the absence of a coherent development strategy on the part of the national or local state, it was again the private sector that started to transform this area. At the eastern end of the principal boulevard (*Piaţa Alba Iulia*) a business and banking district began to develop. The apartment blocks in this area offered abundant office space and a location which had many advantages over the cramped and inaccessible historic centre where business space was in short supply. This development appears to have resulted from uncoordinated private sector initiatives, rather than being the result of any deliberate policy from the government or *Primărie*. Elsewhere in the *Centru Civic* some key structures were valorised by the private sector. A monumental building that was originally intended to be a collective food hall was converted into Romania's first shopping mall in 1999. Another monumental structure behind *Palatul Parlamentului* was purchased by Marriott and opened as Romania's first five-star hotel in November 2000 (Ciobanu). Other investors put in proposals for the vacant land of the *Centru Civic* - one project (which came to nothing) envisaged a Dracula theme park alongside *Palatul Parlamentului* (Ioan, "Power"). Thus the private sector started to recognise the real estate value of (parts of) the *Centru Civic* and brought about more material change in the area than the post-socialist state (at either central or city level).

The Cathedral of National Salvation: Christianising the *Centru Civic*

Since the fall of Ceauşescu the status and influence of the Romanian Orthodox Church has increased dramatically and the institution now enjoys the support and allegiance of a large majority of Romanians (Stan and Turcescu, "Romanian"). The Romanian Orthodox Church has long had plans to erect a grand cathedral in Bucharest. The idea dates back to the late 19th century and although the project enjoyed political and royal support at that time no progress was made with its construction, largely due to lack of funds and the difficulty in agreeing on a location (Stan and Turcescu, "Politics"). However, the plan for a grand cathedral was revived after 1989 and in 1995 the Patriarch proposed that a *Catedrala Mântuirii Neamului* (Cathedral of National Salvation) should be built in Bucharest. This was to be an explicit statement of the importance of *Romanian* Orthodoxism for post-socialist Romania, designed by a Romanian architect, and intended to neutralise the inherited socialist landscape while signalling the importance of Christianity to Romania as a 'European' nation. While enjoying the support of many Romanians the project is not without its critics among architects and representatives of civic society.

In 1929 a cross had been erected in *Piaţa Bibescu Voda* (Bibescu Voda Square) to mark the future location of the cathedral (Stan and Turcescu, "Politics"). This square was now part of *Piaţa Unirii*, situated in the heart of the *Centru Civic*. In many ways this therefore represented an ideal location for a national cathedral. There was plenty of space in this large square for a new monumental structure. Moreover, by being located in the heart of the *Centru Civic* this was an opportunity to reconfigure a landscape of atheistic communism and inscribe it with new meanings which asserted the triumph of Christian values and their importance to post-socialist Romania. In addition, the cathedral had the potential to become a highly visible materialisation of the healing that was so widely desired for the *Centru Civic*. The project also

enjoyed the political support of the centre-right coalition government (one member of which, the Christian Democrats, was particularly supportive of the cathedral project). In 1999 a public ceremony took place to bless the future site of the cathedral and a stone cross was planted to mark the spot. This was attended by the Patriarch, the president, prime minister and numerous political, religious and civic dignitaries.

However, the *Piaţa Unirii* site was problematic for a number of reasons (Stan and Turcescu, "Politics"). The cathedral was to be built on top of a large and busy metro station where two metro lines meet. The river Dâmboviţa also flows under the square at this point. Architects pointed out that the foundations of the cathedral would be unstable without additional (and expensive) strengthening. In 2001 the newly-elected Social Democratic government was also keen to relocate the cathedral, again to avoid having to support a project that was initiated by their political opponents. A new site was proposed, on the principal boulevard of the *Centru Civic* on what had formerly been the site for *Cântarea României*, a giant concert hall (see Figure 4). Again, the location of the cathedral in the heart of Ceauşescu's center would contribute to healing this area. It could also break the monotony of the principal boulevard by adding a new focal point in a large site that would be surrounded by plentiful open space (Ioan, "Byzantine"). This was also an opportunity to remove the eyesore of an abandoned building site which was now overgrown with vegetation and littered with rusting cranes. However, for a variety of reasons the leadership of the Orthodox Church objected to this location and the proposal to build the cathedral here was abandoned (Stan and Turcescu, "Politics").

During 2003 an alternative location was proposed at *Parcul Carol I* (Carol I Park) several kilometres from the *Centru Civic*. This would have involved demolishing an elegant communist-era mausoleum, as well as building on one of Bucharest's few areas of urban greenspace. Civil society activists launched a concerted campaign against the cathedral which

attracted the support of the Mayor of Bucharest. Again, with a change of government in November 2004 this location was abandoned (Light and Young, "Political").

In 2005 yet another location for the Cathedral was announced - once again the cathedral was to return to the *Centru Civic*. The government proposed a location on the large area of vacant (and largely derelict) land behind *Palatul Parlamentului*. This generally met with support from all parties and the new location was confirmed by law on 5 October 2005. The new cathedral will be a substantial structure and will rival *Palatul Parlamentului* in scale. It will cover an area of 11ha and at 110m in height will be almost 30m taller than the parliament palace. Inside there will be room for 5000 worshippers (Manoliu, "Catedrala"). This structure will perform the same role as the skyscrapers proposed by the von Gerkan plan - it will blunt and distract from the symbolic impact of the *Palatul Parlamentului* and provide a new focal point for the Bucharest skyline. It also makes an unambiguous statement about Romania's Orthodox identity whilst asserting the triumph of Christianity over totalitarianism. However, some architects caution about the placing of two large monumental buildings with such contradictory meanings in such close proximity (Ioan, "The History"). It remains to be seen whether the construction of the National Cathedral will effectively heal this part of the *Centru Civic* and benefit the city of Bucharest as a whole. At the time of writing (March 2012) building work has yet to start.

The *Esplanada* project: an iconic development for a European capital

During the latter 1990s a new impetus emerged for addressing the built environment of Romania's capital. In 1997 the EU had stated that Romania met the basic political criteria for membership and in 1999 it agreed to begin accession negotiations with Romania. However, the EU had yet to recognise Romania as a functioning market economy, a key step on the road

to accession (Phinnemore). The Social Democratic government elected in 2000 had one key foreign policy objective - to secure Romania's accession to the EU. It thus set out on a programme to introduce the necessary reforms to enable Romania to join the EU and, more broadly, to improve Romania's image in the wider world.

It was in this context that another proposal for the re-development of the *Centru Civic* was put forward. Although the Social Democratic government had swiftly cancelled the *Bucureşti 2000* project it eventually recognised the need to address the problem of the unfinished *Centru Civic* particularly since Ceauşescu's abandoned project was starkly at odds with Bucharest's aspirations as a post-socialist city and future EU capital. A government ordinance of 2002 provided for the removal of the numerous abandoned tower cranes that still littered this area and which, in the words of the Prime Minister, Adrian Năstase, created a "landscape of ruins, of a bombed-out city" (C. Popa III). Two years later a government decision of 18 March 2004 announced an ambitious development programme for the *Cântarea României* site on the principal boulevard (see Figure 2). This involved construction of a multi-functional complex of offices and other commercial space, apartments, hotels and a shopping mall (Cristian). It would create 500,000 square meters of new space at an estimated cost of €650 million (Primărie Municipiul Bucureşti undated). Described as an 'urban flagstone' [sic] this project appears to have been intended as an iconic architectural statement in the heart of Bucharest. On the other hand there were no proposals for addressing the area surrounding the Parliament Palace, much of which remained derelict and undeveloped and which has developed informally into a public park.

The proposals for the *Cântarea României* site were far removed from those envisaged by the winning entry of the *Bucureşti 2000* project. For example, there is no longer any mention of 'healing' the *Centru Civic*. Instead, this development is as much about sending a message to the wider world about Romania's post-socialist aspirations and priorities as it was an

attempt to address the problem of the unfinished *Centru Civic*. The project featured an assemblage of iconic skyscrapers and towers demonstrating an allegiance to international architectural style (see: http://www.skyscrapercity.com/showthread.php?t=496243). The proposal is very much about signalling Bucharest's engagement with processes of international inter-urban competition and entrepreneurial forms of urban governance. For example, the project was to be developed as a public-private partnership (between Bucharest City Hall and a Hungarian property development company) demonstrating an allegiance to Western, neoliberal models of urban governance. Finally, the project was to be given the distinctly un-Romanian - but 'European' and internationally recognisable - name of *Esplanada*.

Surprisingly, the centre-right government that replaced the Social Democrats in the November 2004 elections decided to continue with the *Esplanada* project. However, the starting date was repeatedly postponed. A key problem was the issue of land ownership. Under the terms of the public-private partnership the City Hall was required to provide the land for *Esplanada* while the property development company would undertake the construction work. However, the City Hall did not have legal ownership of much of the land designated for the *Esplanada* project. Although the state had formerly owned this land, a restitution law of 2001 enabled the owners (or their descendents) of buildings or land that had been nationalised by the socialist state to reclaim their original property rights. Many Bucharesters exercised this right with the result that 70% of the land allocated for the *Esplanada* project was owned by private individuals ("Proiectul") generally in small and fragmented parcels (Vulpe). These landowners, aware of the prime real estate value of this area, demanded prices that the City Hall was unable to afford ("Proiectul"). Ironically, the implementation of a key element of neoliberal-inspired economic reform – privatisation and

land restitution – has subverted the state's attempts to engage in an international flagship urban redevelopment project as a way to connect post-socialist Romania to global capitalism.

At the same time, the *Esplanada* project has enjoyed little popular support among the people of Bucharest. It was a project promoted by a political elite but which was poorly aligned with the needs of the city and had little to offer the Bucharest public (Manoliu, "Primarul"). For example, the development did nothing to alleviate the chronic shortage of affordable residential accommodation in the city. Similarly, it offered little to address the shortage of greenspace or open public space in the city (Ioan, "The History"). Moreover, it potentially created an over-supply of high-value retail space (particularly since the nearest shopping mall was less than a kilometre away). While there was a shortage of hotel bedspaces in Bucharest there were numerous hotel developments around the city that were addressing this shortfall.

Moreover, in the June 2008 electoral campaign for the Mayoralty of Bucharest a number of candidates publically opposed the *Esplanada* project. Foremost among them was the winning candidate, Sorin Oprescu. Formerly a member of the Social Democratic Party, Oprescu had failed to secure the party's nomination as candidate for mayor of Bucharest and campaigned instead as an independent. During the election campaign he promised that the land destined for *Esplanada* would be used instead for a public park, a stance which, according to some analysts, played a key role in his electoral success (Moga). This dramatic loss of political support combined with the difficulty in securing ownership of the land seems to have finished off the *Esplanada* project. In 2010 the press announced that the project had been abandoned (Curteanu). There is no mention of *Esplanada* in the 2009-12 Development Plan for Bucharest (Primărie Municipiului Bucureşti 2009) and it does not feature on the City Hall's website. Meanwhile, the site remains derelict: it has now been extensively reclaimed by vegetation and is home to many of Bucharest's stray dogs.

Conclusion

As Smith and Ebejer argue, capital cities act as a nation-state's "window to the world." In all sorts of ways the capital city represents the nation-state. For this reason political orders have long invested considerable efforts in creating an urban landscape that is an expression of national and cultural identity. When there is a period of political change there is usually a remaking of the urban landscape of the capital city. In the context of the fall of state-socialism there are celebrated examples of how states have prioritised the reconfiguring of the landscape of the capital city in order to proclaim a post-socialist identity. Berlin is perhaps the foremost example. However, we have argued in this paper that there are other trajectories for post-socialist capitals where efforts to remake the urban landcape have been frustrated by the enduring physical legacy of a former political order.

We have used the case of Bucharest to argue that the persistence of landscape elements from the socialist era has disrupted and challenged post-socialist identity-formation. In particular Nicolae Ceauşescu's extravagent *Centru Civic* has proved to be a substantial challenge to efforts to remake the landscape of Bucharest in the post-socialist period. In contrast to the coordinated, large-scale re-development of the city centre during the socialist period, the reconfiguring of this project since 1989 has been piecemeal, uncoordinated and largely left to the private sector. There was widespread agreement that Ceauşescu's unwanted legacy needed to be addressed (and the city needed to be healed), however, alongside all the other challenges of economic reform and restructuring addressing the *Centru Civic* was a much lower priority. Even if the political will had been present, it is difficult to see how the Romanian state could have deployed or attracted sufficient investment to destroy or significantly modify the *Centru Civic* and key buildings like *Palatul Parlamentului* and

Cântarea României. The result is that 22 years after Romania's 'Revolution' much of Ceauşescu's landscape remains largely unchanged. Sections unfinished in 1989 remain unfinished and *Palatul Parlamentului* still dominates the landscape and the skyline. The central boulevard still lacks an obvious purpose. At the same time, parts of that landscape have become more absorbed into the functioning of the city, with their status as government buildings or sought-after real estate supporting their continuity.

Thus in Bucharest despite two decades of competitions, proposals and projects the cityscape continues to be discordant with Romania's post-socialist identity and Bucharest's aspirations to be a 'European Capital'. Unlike other cities, in Bucharest's case there is very little chance of restoring historical continuity with pre-socialist times by erasing the socialist city-centre and re-instating the older built environment in order for the city to re-build its identity. Thus, as Romanian architectural critics note, Bucharest remains "an unfinished project" (Ioan, "Urban" 346) and an "open wound" (Ioan, "Power" 211).

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Titles for Figures

Figure 1:   The *Centru Civic*, showing the current street layout and the boundary of the demolished area

Figure 2:   *Casa Poporului* (the House of the People). The official name of the building is *Palatul Parlamentului* (the Parliament Palace)

Figure 3:   The view along Bulevardul Unirii from *Palatul Parlamentului*

Figure 4:   The abandoned site of *Cântarea României* (2009)